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EVIL EFFECTS *of* POLYTHEISM *on the* MORALS *of*  
*the* HEATHENS. *By a Young Gentleman, an Under-graduate*  
*in the University of Dublin. Communicated by the Reverend*  
 JOHN KEARNEY, D.D. S.F.T.C.D. and M.R.I.A.

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THE divine will being the criterion of moral rectitude\* to Read Feb.  
 man, his conceptions of the divine nature, upon which depend <sup>13, 1790.</sup>  
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\* To this it may be objected, that thus the summit of moral rectitude in the Deity will differ not only in degree, but in very essence, from that which is moral rectitude in imperfect agents. I answer—No. Perfect goodness therefore resides in the Deity, because he wills and ever unerringly consults the aggregate of happiness in his creation. His moral creatures are the less imperfect in goodness the more uniformly they co-operate in promoting the same end. But it is necessary that such a moral agent as man should have some other immediate standard for directing his actions than their tendency to advance the general good of the universe; since his limited faculties must continually expose him to erroneous judgments, from the impossibility of taking in at one view all the dependencies of causes and effects—all that chain of consequences, which unites the most dissimilar events and the most distant periods. Hence the necessity of seeking the immediate criterion of right and wrong in the will of that Being who cannot err; and hence too the necessity that his will should be *revealed*.

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his conceptions of the divine will, must materially influence his moral conduct. And hence we may draw this general conclusion, that false notions of the Deity must ever produce more or less immorality in our lives. This conclusion we shall proceed to confirm, by a particular consideration of the moral effects which the popular theology of the heathens was calculated to produce. And if all those effects were not actually produced, we must look for their prevention to the operation of other causes. Nor does it concern our present subject to consider what were the opinions of some more enlightened philosophers about the divine being and attributes ; for the opinions of philosophers have scarcely any influence upon the practice of the multitude.

AND here *polytheism* first offers itself to our view, as the fundamental doctrine of every pagan system ; and polytheism is a doctrine which strikes at the very ground-work of all morality. With the *unity* of God, the immutability and permanence of moral rectitude is immediately connected. Where is the permanence or immutability of virtue, if the divine will be not immutable and permanent ? And how can the divine will be immutable or permanent, if there be a *plurality* of Gods ? Admit a plurality of wills, and a contrariety is possible : but if there be a contrariety, not only the uniformity of virtue is destroyed, but the same action may become at once virtuous and vicious, as that action may to one divinity be agreeable which is displeasing to another. The impure sensualist, the violent oppressor, the fraudulent, the revengeful—will find some tutelary gods to sanction their most criminal excesses—gods to whom their most criminal excesses will be but grateful sacrifices ; while the man of strictest virtue must  
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see himself exposed to the resentment of each deified vice. Thus polytheism, in destroying the stability of virtue, destroys her very essence.

THE same thing may also be inferred by examining one of the sources from which the system of polytheism has originated. And here it is necessary to combat an assertion of Mr. Hume's, that contains one of those secret attacks on revealed religion, which are no further dangerous than as they come from an insidious foe. In his "Natural History of Religion" he asserts and advances specious arguments to prove that "polytheism was the primary religion of man." But his assertion and his arguments are founded on this supposition, that the Mosaic account of man's original production is false—that the origin of all human society is not to be traced back to a single pair. The truth of this supposition we shall not try upon the ground of revelation, but examine it merely by the light of reason. It involves one of these two hypotheses—either that there has been a series of generated beings actually infinite, or that the Deity at first *created a society of men*. The former is one of those old atheistical hypotheses, which if at all difficult to be refuted, is only so on account of its absurdity and inherent contradictions. But the consideration of that is foreign from our present purpose. As to the latter hypothesis, if it be received as a maxim that in the inanimate world Nature does nothing in vain, must it not be equally true that in the animate world the operations of the God of Nature are none of them in vain? And would it not have been operating in vain to have produced a multitude of human beings, by the immediate interposition of

his *creative* power, when the formation of a first pair would have been sufficient to effect the same end.? Secondary causes, I allow, and what are called the established laws of Nature, are but more remote or more regular exertions of the divine omnipotence. But experience and reason testify that the divine omnipotence will thus regularly operate by those secondary causes, and according to the established laws of Nature, except where those regular operations are inadequate. If men were formerly *created*, who might as well have been produced by *generation*, why is not the immediate fiat of the Deity still similarly interposed? And if not interposed now, because it need not, why should we imagine that it has been at any former period, when its interposition was unnecessary? Thus then the inutility of the supposition, and its repugnance to analogy are sufficient to make us reject it, and conclude that the whole human race are descendants of but one man and one woman.

BUT there is a still stronger argument in support of the same conclusion. To maintain the contrary hypothesis is to maintain that the power of the Deity in man's creation was exerted in a manner not only useless, but positively hurtful. Human society, at the same time that it affords us means of supplying our wants with facility, increases their number. In the catalogue of our necessities, by far the greater part will be found to originate in our connection with others. That connection supplies the necessities which it creates. But how does it supply them? By the reciprocation of advantages acquired in the gradual advancement of society. By the commutation of good offices between the wealthy, the skilful, the experienced, and the powerful;  
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which interest directs, and progressive civilization enables them to interchange. What then must be the consequence of a *society* of *created* men? of men equally needing assistance in all things; and from that very equality of wants, equally incapable of imparting it in any:—the necessities of each much greater and more numerous than if he were the only individual of his species, and his ability to supply them infinitely less. Is it necessary to add that the darkness of the prospect is heightened, when in such an assembly of human beings we look in vain for those ties of kindred, affinity, gratitude, and previous acquaintance:—for all that now cements the materials of society, and secures its advantages? The consequences that would ensue are such as the least acute must perceive, and the least candid must acknowledge to be fatal.

REASON, therefore, as well as revelation, authorizes us to affirm that there has been a first man; and the immediate inference from this truth directly contradicts Mr. Hume's assertion, that *polytheism* made part of man's primary religious faith. The first man starts into existence at the word of almighty power. What is the first thought which must obtrude itself on his mind? Is it not this enquiry—"whence am I?" And must not his unbiassed, unsophisticated reason ascribe such a great effect to the operation of a mighty cause? He views the wonderful symmetry of his frame, and concludes that the same cause is a wise intelligence. He exults in his young existence, and acknowledges that cause to be as good as he is intelligent and powerful. In himself, in his faculties, and his existence,  
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he reads—he is forced to read the evident characters of a Being, mighty, bountiful and wise; and this Being is his God. Whether there be other beings equally wise, powerful or good, it concerns not him to enquire. Even if there be, they are no Gods to him. His Creator he naturally regards as his sole divinity; and clothes him with those attributes alone which awe, gratitude and admiration are calculated to suggest. But this simplicity in the object of religious worship will naturally cease, as the number of worshippers is augmented. When men are multiplied on the earth, their corruptions will be multiplied;—the variety of human dispositions, circumstances and fortunes will be encreased;—and the image of the Deity, viewed through all these mediums, will be tinged with a variety of colours. Different men will form different conceptions of the divine nature; and each different conception will constitute a distinct divinity. And here the vices and evil propensities of mankind will operate most powerfully. The god of the voluptuous, will be a god of sensuality—the god of the dishonest, will be a god of fraud—the god of the indolent, will be a god of selfish inactivity—of the turbulent, a god of war and violence. Each earthly corruption will by degrees extend its influence to the heavens; and each corrupt deity in return will patronize, extend and perpetuate those vices from which he has derived his origin.

I HAVE thus as briefly as possible endeavoured to prove that the general tendency of polytheism is inimical to good morals. I should now proceed to examine the various particular evils  
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which it occasions, especially that one of dissolving the bond of universal benevolence; and the other numerous tenets of pagan theology would next come to be considered. But these open too wide a field to be entered on at present. If the subject be resumed at any future period, it will be necessary to refute some more opinions, advanced by a writer on whom I have already had occasion to animadvert.